

Family history through cinema

(This piece was written in February 2023. My mother passed away in December,)

Several nights each week, I play the role of my mother's caregiver. Mostly I hang out with her and serve her dinner before the overnight caregiver comes to spend the night with her.

My mom is in her 90s, no one is certain exactly how 90 but the odds are 94. That might sound odd, but one has to understand that when my mother was born, in a village somewhere in Pakistan, birth dates weren't recorded. Her rural family had more important things to do in the early 1910s (cultivate wheat, tend to the livestock) than stop and note the birth of another mouth to feed.

She and I usually watch Punjabi movies together. I like to pepper her with questions about her own life. She usually ignores me because I guess she probably feels questioned out by now. Or maybe she just prefers the quiet because honestly, she's had her share of noise.

Once upon a time ago, my mother's home was loud and overpopulated. Kids were doubled up in beds and hand-me-downs were the fashion. My dad and his brother shared a peach-growing business and like other immigrants, our two families also shared a home. Each family had five kids and shared the one bathroom in the house. Whenever the family reminisces or shares the story of growing up in the white-tiled house on Ruth Avenue, the mention of the singular toilet elicits wide-eyed shock and chuckles. What? Our parents were immigrants and that's just the way things were done. You waited your turn to poop.

By the time I came on the scene, the last of the 10 Purewal cousins born into the family compound, my uncle, aunt and their brood had moved to their own home. Much later, my oldest brother, his wife and their three kids finally moved out.

Decades passed and eventually it was just my mom and dad left at home. Dad passed away 11 years ago and since then, my mom has lived alone, though she is never really alone as a carousel of caregivers rotate in and out.

Oh and another thing about my mother, even though she's been in the United States 60 years, she has never learned to speak English. When she did have to interface with the outside world, someone was always with her to translate.

She did pick up a few phrases like "one minute, wait" and "wrong number," the latter she would holler into the phone when someone inadvertently dialed our residence. Maybe by speaking at a really high decibel she figured she had a better chance of being understood.

If a friend called for me, I'd freeze, mortified. My mom would shout for me, screaming my name as it is actually pronounced in Punjabi, "Souhk-jheet" right into the receiver. It was bad enough she dressed like she was still in India, but couldn't she at least try to Anglicize my name? Souk-jeet. Sheesh. Did I mention my dad wore a turban? The way I looked at it, I was a mutant cursed by my family's Indianness.

Nowadays mom spends most of her time sleeping late or dozing in her recliner which creaks and leans to one side, taking mom with it. Once my mom slowed down some years ago, my siblings and I decided to upgrade my mother's cable package so she could pass her time watching Punjabi movies.

A huge throughline in all Indian cinema remains romance and lavish weddings. Indian directors obviously figured out a long time ago that over the top romance, complete with grandiose singing and dancing, could help them profit off moviegoers seeking legalized escapism.

Of course, real life was nothing of the sort for my parents. There was zero romance when it came to their marriage.

The way my mom tells it, her father was opposed to her marriage with my dad. Although my dad was a pretty hot catch, standing at over six feet and peering out from a set of dashing green eyes, he was a lot older than my mom. If my raw calculations are correct, which is all I have to go on since dad's actual age was also unknown, he could have been 20 years older than my mom. What's a couple of decades right?

In the end, dad got his girl. Since my mom's older sister was already married to my dad's cousin, my grandparents likely realized it was easier just to give in.

Back when my parents were married, it was also customary that the bride and groom did not see each other until their wedding night. (At the point of no return I suppose.) To prevent any sneak peaks during the actual ceremony, a man wore (and some still do) a "sehra," an ornamentation made of beads or flowers, which dangles from the turban. Think male burka. Meanwhile, his bride hid behind her head covering or her "chunni."

When I asked my mom if such arrangements ever included any escape clause, she glared at me. I dropped the subject.

Recently I found out there is still more I didn't know about my parents' marriage.

This I discovered when we were watching a movie called *Daana Paani*. In the movie our heroine, the gorgeous Simi Chahal is married off as a little girl of five or six due to extenuating circumstances. The girl's aunt explains to her that although she was married, she wouldn't be leaving for her husband's home until she was ready to be a wife, which wouldn't be for years down the road.

When the time was right, her husband's family would come to take the girl because she would be ready to perform her wifely duties. That would be the occasion marked as her "muklawa."

Hmm. Wait. I turned to my mom and asked if she too had a "muklawa."

"Ah-ho," she replied. Translation: of course she did. My mother said it was two years after her marriage that she went and joined my father's family.

Why two years? How did my grandparents settle on that number? After all, I know my mother was a young child when she was married. Did her parents decide mom had done enough of her share of the chores? Milked enough cows?

When I question my mom about it, it's always the same response, that's just the way things were done. No, she doesn't know why it was two years.

Traditions. What are you going to do?

Oh, on the subject of marriage, I learned more about weddings in rural villages when we were watching *Manje Bistre*. The plot revolves around an upcoming family wedding. Male members of the family stop at neighbors' homes asking if they can borrow beds (woven cots) or linen in order to accommodate relatives and guests who would be coming for the wedding. Viola. Instant bed and breakfast.

As my mom explained it, borrowing such basic necessities from one's neighbors wasn't unusual. It's just what families did in those times. To loosely translate my mom's explanation, "You did what you had to to get by."

That's been my mom's motto her whole life. Whether it was recycling plastic bags or the aluminum foil she wrapped my dad's lunch in, she always made the most of whatever was available to her. She was an immigrant who learned to save and scrimp. That was one of the many lessons she taught me: always save for tomorrow.

That and to never question tradition.

Oh and also to stop bugging her with so many questions.